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The major themes that described low-income culture were: security over status, pragmatism and anti-intellectualism, alienation attitude, cooperation, person-centered attitude, physicalism, traditionalism, excitement, non-joining attitude, and stable, female based extended family.

The learning styles of the low-income group were physical and visual, externally oriented, problem-centered, inductive, slow, and involved one-track thinking.

Differences between the lower class and the working class included such things as the former living under more oppressive conditions, having less access to middle class goals and goods, and having less stability in terms of job, neighborhood, and family. The lower class also had fewer working class traditions and less urban experience, as well as having a different ethnic composition. Similarities of the two groups included performing manual work for their livelihood, an estrangement from the middle class prestige race, and living a "realistic," physical life. and both groups had a family and community life that led to interdependence and cooperation.

The factors that produced low-income cultures were lack of middle-class opportunities, indigenous sources (family life, work life, neighborhood), ethnic factors, and rural origins.

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MOBILIZATION FOR YOUTH

TRAINING AND PERSONNEL

Action Approaches to Low Income Culture*

Frank Riessman
September, 1962

Part I

Low Income Culture

Low Income Culture**

Major Themes and Learning Styles

A Portrait of the Underprivileged

The "Lower Class" and the "Working Class" - Differences and Similarities

The Action-seekers and the *Routine seekers*

The Determinants: What Produces Low Income Culture?

Deprivation From Middle Class Opportunities

Indigenous Sources: Work, Family, Neighborhood

Ethnic Factors

Rural Origins

A Balanced View

* based on a speech delivered at Training Program for Mobilization For Youth Staff, September, 1962

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Part I

Low-Income Culture

Low-income groups include what is sometimes referred to as "lower class" (largely unskilled laborers whose employment is more irregular) and "working class" (semi-skilled and skilled workers whose employment is more stable). While there are some important differences between these two groups, and ethnic variations further complicate the picture, we will be mainly concerned with certain basic features, more or less characteristic of low-income culture as a whole, recognizing all the while that some of these characteristics are probably distributed differently in the "lower" and "working" classes. We also recognize that Negro, Italian, and Irish low-income culture are each different from the other along ethnic lines, but we will concentrate on the underlying similarities related to their low-income status.

Basic Characteristics

Different writers portray somewhat different pictures of low-income culture, although there are many common features in their presentations. The differences are possibly due to the fact that some investigators refer more to one subgroup within the low-income complex: thus Walter Miller refers largely to Negro and Irish "lower class" youths and consequently accents peer culture values more than the family determined values; Herbert Gans describes Italian "working class" and "lower class" groups with a heavy emphasis on working class family norms; Lee Rainwater is more concerned with "working class" wives and thus centers more on consumer attitudes.

What then are some of the characteristics of low-income culture that seem to be fairly characteric despite differences in emphasis?

Walter Miller describes the "focal concerns" of this culture revolving about "trouble", "toughness", "smartness", "excitement", "fate", "autonomy".[1]

Albert Cohen,[2] in a forthcoming article, lists the following characteristics: family and kinship stress, neighboring, restricted participation in voluntary associations, preference for the familiar, anti-intellectuality, authoritarianism, intolerance, pessimism-insecurity, cynicism, extra-punitiveness, patriarchy, toughness, consumption stress.

The following is a list that I have recently compiled of major themes and learning styles characteristic of low-income culture and psychology:

Major Themes in Low-Income Culture

1. Security vs. Status - the key
2. Pragmatism and anti-intellectualism
3. Powerlessness, the unpredictable world, and fate
4. Alienation, anger and the underdog
5. Cooperation, gregariousness, equalitarianism and humor
6. Authority and informality not in contradiction
7. Person centered, particularism
8. Physicalism, masculinity and health
9. Traditionalism and prejudice
10. Excitement, action, luck, and the consumer orientation
11. The non-joiner
12. The special significance of the extended family. Stable, female based, households.

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1. See Walter B. Miller, "Lower Class Culture as a Generating Milieu of Gang Delinquency", Journal of Social Issues, Vol. XIV, No. 3, 1958, pp. 7-8.
2. Albert Cohen, and Harold Hodges, "Characteristics of the Lower-Blue-Collar Class", Social Problems, In Press.

Learning Styles (Ways of thinking and working)[3]

1. Physical and visual rather than aural.
2. Content-centered rather than form-centered.
3. Externally oriented rather than introspective.
4. Problem-centered rather than abstract-centered.
5. Inductive rather than deductive.
6. Spatial rather than temporal.
7. Slow, careful, patient, persevering (in areas of importance), rather than quick, clever, facile.
8. Games and action vs. tests.
9. Expressive vs. instrumental orientation.
10. One track thinking and unorthodox learning rather than "other directed" flexibility.
11. Words in relation to action rather than word-bound (Inventive word power and "hip" language).

Thus far we have listed certain general characteristics of low-income culture. It may be helpful now to fill in these broad categories with more specific descriptions rendered by different writers (reported in Herbert Gans', The Urban Villagers)[4] and including characteristics of low-income people in other nations and subcultures.

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3. See Frank Riessman - The Culturally Deprived Child, Ch. VII, VIII, Harper and Row, 1962.
4. Herbert Gans, The Urban Villagers, Free Press, 1962, pp. 231, 235, 236, 237, 267.

Richard Hoggart's description of how the English worker views the world provides perspective: " . . . the world outside is strange and often unhelpful . . . it has most of the counters stacked on its side . . . to meet it on its own terms is difficult. One may call this, making use of a word commonly used by the working classes, the world of "Them." . . . The world of "Them" is the world of the bosses, whether these bosses are private individuals or . . . public officials . . . "Them" includes the policemen and those civil servants . . . whom the working classes meet . . . To the very poor, especially, they compose a shadowy but numerous and powerful group affecting their lives at almost every point . . . "They" are "the people at the top" . . . who . . . "get yer in the end," "aren't really to be trusted," "are all in a clique together," "treat Y'like muck."[5]

Gans reports a world-wide trend supportive of Hoggart's observations: "(low-income people evidence) a reluctance to visit settlement houses, and a fear of doctors and hospitals that seems to be found in all countries. Similarly, working-class people everywhere believe-or know-the police to be crooked, and politicians, corrupt. In America, England, and Mexico, researchers have described the working-and lower-class antagonism toward law, government, and politics. Conversely, the mass media are accepted, often more enthusiastically than by other classes. A recently published study of American television viewers has made this finding, and noted the working-class audience's interest in and identification with performers. Several studies have also suggested the preference for action dramas over other forms of media content, not only in

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5. Richard Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy, Londan, Chatto, and Windus, 1957 chp. 3

America, but all over the world. In Green's study of a Polish group, the rejection of romantic films by young working-class adults was described as follows: "At the local movie house, when the hero pauses in pursuit of the villain to proffer the heroine a tender sentiment, whistling and footstamping greet his fall from grace."[6]

John Seeley's description of a Polish working class group is relevant in our cross culture analysis: " . . . no society I have lived in before or since seemed to me to present so many of its members . . . so many possibilities and actualities of fulfillment of a number at least of basic human demands: for an outlet for aggressiveness, for adventure, for a sense of effectiveness, for deep feelings of belonging without undue sacrifice of uniqueness or identity, for sex satisfaction, for strong if not fierce loyalties, for a sense of independence from the pervasive omnicompetent, omniscient authority-in-general which at that time still overwhelmed to a greater degree the middle-class child. These things had their prices, of course - not all values can be simultaneously maximized. But few of the inhabitants whom I reciprocally took "slumming" into middle-class life understood it or, where they did, were at all envious of it. And, be it asserted, this was not a matter of "ignorance" or incapacity to "appreciate finer things," but an inability to see one moderately coherent and sense-making satisfaction-system which they didn't know as preferable to the quite coherent and sense-making satisfaction-system they did know."[7]

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6. Gans, op. cit., pp.236-237 (quoting from E. Padilla, A. Cohen, R. Haggart, O. Lewis, I. Glids and S. Levy, B. Berger, A. Green)
7. Gans, op. cit., p. 267 (quoting from J. R. Seeley)

A Portrait of the Underprivileged

In order to enrich further the picture of the low income person, it may be useful to construct what sociologists call an ideal type. The portrait of the underprivileged that follows is intended as just such an ideal type presentation.

He is traditional, "old fashioned" in many ways, patriarchal,[*1] superstitious, somewhat religious, though not so religious as his wife.

He reads ineffectively, is poorly informed in many areas, and is often suggestible, although, interestingly enough, he is frequently suspicious of "talk" and "newfangled ideas."

While there are numerous areas about which he is confused and lacking in opinion (e.g., a high percentage of "no answer" and "don't know" on public opinion polls), there are important spheres in which the deprived person has definite, intense convictions and, indeed, is difficult to move. His beliefs about morality, punishment, custom, diet, traditional education (in contrast to progressive education, which he firmly rejects, the role of women, intellectuals, are illustrative here. Many of these attitudes are related to his traditional orientation and they are held unquestioningly in the typical traditional manner. They are not open to reason and they are not flexible opinions.

Frequently, the deprived individual feels alienated, not fully a part of society, left out, frustrated in what he can do. This alienation is expressed

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* Reprinted from The Culturally Deprived Child, Harper, 1962, p. 26-30.
1. The deprived culture is essentially male-centered, with the exception of a major section of the Negro sub-culture which is matriarchal.

in a ready willingness to believe in the corruptness of leaders, and a generally antagonistic feeling toward "big shots."

The average underprivileged person is not individualistic, introspective, self-oriented, or concerned with self-expression. It is unlikely that he will embrace an outlook that prefers moderation, balance, seeing all sides of an issue.

He holds the world, rather than himself, responsible for his misfortunes; consequently, he is much less apt to suffer pangs of self-blame, and can be more direct in his expressions of aggression.

Since he sees problems as being caused externally rather than internally, he is more likely to be a poor patient in psychotherapy.

While desiring a better standard of living, he is not attracted to a middle-class style of life, with its accompanying concern for status, prestige, and individualistic methods of betterment. A need for "getting by" rather than "getting ahead" in the self-realization and advancement sense is likely to be dominant. He prefers jobs that promise security to those that entail risk. He does not want to become a foreman because of the economic insecurity resulting from the loss of job seniority.

He is not class conscious, and while he is somewhat radical on a few economic issues, he is destinctly illiberal on numerous matters, particularly civil liberties and foreign policy. He is not interested in politics, does not vote a good deal of the time, and generally belongs to few organizations.

With regard to democracy, he seems to have two sets of attitudes which, on occasion, conflict. He tends to favor the underdog and his relationships to people are marked by an equalitarian, outspoken informality.[2] He is strongly anti-communist, but he does possess a number of traits that have author-

2. He is not equalitarian in his relationship to women as his culture is predominantly patriarchal. In the portion of the Negro sub-culture which is matriarchal, the male-female relationships seem more equalitarian.

itarian potential: he likes strong leaders; he is prejudiced and intolerant; he is less likely to see the need for having dissident opinions.

He sets great store by his family and his personal comforts.

He has an informal, human quality of easy, comfortable relationship to people where the affectionate bite of humor is appreciated. The factory "horseplay," the ritualistic kidding, is part of this pattern. He emphasizes personal qualities. It is the man, not the job, that is important.

The neighbor who gets ahead is expected "not to put on airs"; he should continue to like the "old gang" and accept them despite his new position. An individual is expected to transcend his office. A foremen is an S.O.B., not because he is subject to stresses and demands on the job that force him to act harshly, but because of his personal qualities. Contrariwise, one of the top executives is frequently regarded as one who would help the rank-and-file if he had the chance because he is "a nice guy."

At the political level, the candidate as a decent, human person is more important than the platform.

The deprived individual likes excitement, likes to get away from the humdrum of daily life. News, gossip, new gadgets, sports, are consequently attractive. To some extent, his desire to have new goods, whether television sets or cars, is part of this excitement dimension. The excitement theme is often in contradiction to the traditional orientation.[3]

He is pragmatic and anti-intellectual. It is the end result that counts. What can be seen and felt is more likely to be real and true in his perspective. His practical orientation does not encourage abstract ideas. Education,

3. It is perhaps worth noting that different sub-groups may favor one theme rather than another. Thus, younger groups, and especially juvenile delinquents, are probably much more attracted to the excitement theme, are more alienated, and less traditional.

for what it does for one in terms of opportunities, may be desirable, but abstract, intellectual speculation, ideas that are not rooted in the realities of the present, are not useful, and indeed may be harmful. On the other hand, he may have an exaggerated respect for the ability of the learned. A person with intellectual competence in one field is frequently thought of as a "brain", with ability in all fields.

The anti-intellectualism of the underprivileged individual is one of his most significant handicaps. It is expressed in his feeling that life is a much better teacher than books-theory is impractical, "most big ideas that look good on paper won't work in practice," "talk is bull," intellectuals are "phony eggheads." This anti-intellectualism seems to be rooted in a number of the traits that characterize him: his physical style, alienation, antagonism to the school, defensiveness regarding his gullibility, and his generally pragmatic outlook.

The deprived individual appears to learn in what Miller and Swanson describe as a much more physical or motoric fashion. "Some people can think through a problem only if they can work on it with their hands. Unless they can manipulate objects physically, they cannot perform adequately. Other people (symbolic learners) feel more comfortable if they can get a picture of the task and then solve it in their heads. They may be handicapped in attacking problems that require a motoric orientation."[4]

This difference in approach or style of life is expressed in many areas. In religion, for example, the deprived individual is much more likely to enjoy physical manifestations of emotions such as hand clapping and singing, in contrast to the more dignified sermon. Miller and Swanson note also that when the deprived individual becomes mentally ill, he is more likely to develop symptoms

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4. Daniel R. Miller and Guy E. Swanson, Inner Conflict and Defense (New York: Henry Holt, 1960), p. 24.

such as conversion hysteria and catatonia, which involve malfunctions of the voluntary muscles. Middle-class individuals, by contrast, more often develop symptoms such as obsessions and depressions, which are characterized by inhibition of voluntary movements and by ruminative attempts to figure out solutions to conflict.[5]

Another reflection of the physical orientation is to be found in the deprived individual's admiration for strength and endurance, two of his principal economic assets. His great interest in sports, and admiration for prize fighters and baseball heroes, is one reflection of his attitude toward physical prowess. This interest may stem, in part, from a way of life that calls for considerable "ruggedness." The man who stands up well under these difficult conditions of life is well thought of. Furthermore, the status-giving attribute of strength is not easily usurped by other groups. This represents one possible line of achievement respected to some extent by other classes, although perhaps for different reasons.

Closely related to this physical bias is the emphasis on masculinity. The underprivileged boy's emphasis on masculinity derives, in part, from his patriarchal culture where the father is the "tough boss" of the home, and his authority is backed up by physical force. Even in the Negro sub-culture, the mother frequently plays a strong, masculine type of role, and is prone to stress and utilize physical force.

Talk, reading, and intellectualism in general are viewed as unmasculine - the opposite of action. Moreover, the school is often imaged as a "prissy" place dominated by women and female values.[6]

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5. Ibid., pp. 310-311.
6. Sexton discusses this issue in detail and refers to the "female school." See Patricia Sexton, Education and Income (New York: The Viking Press, Inc., 1961) p. 278.

The "Lower Class" and the "Working Class": Differences and Similarities

Differences:

1. The "lower class" lives under more oppresive conditions;

2. The "lower class" has less access to middle class goals and goods;

3. The "lower class" has less access to "working class" means of organization (e.g. unions);

4. The "lower class" has less stability in terms of jobs, neighborhood, and family;

5. The "lower class" has fewer "working class" traditions and less urban experience;

6. The "lower class" has a different ethnic composition, a larger proportion of Negro and Spanish speaking people;

Similarities

1. Both groups are similar in that they perform manual work for their livelihood;

2. Both groups are essentially removed from the middle class prestige race;

3. Both groups live a "realistic", concrete-centered, physical life, and the mental styles of both are quite similar;

4. Both groups have a family and community life that constrains toward some degree of interdependence and cooperation (although there is a greater strain in the "lower class" group.

The Action-Seeker and the Routine-Seekers

Aside from "lower class" and "working class" distinctions within low income culture, and ethnic differences, there are other significant sub-types. Gans develops a typology that includes four groupings:

"These are: the maladapted, the middle-class mobiles, and--the two most important ones--the routine--seekers and action-seekers. The former is based on the search for a routine life, and the latter, on the pursuit of adventurous episodes, or what West Enders call "action"[8]. While the action-seekers are more likely to be in the lower class", Gans notes that not all action-seekers are "lower class." The routine seekers are more often found in the "working class." It is extremely important for the "middle class observer" and the maladapted group, the "people who are entirely unable to control their behavior because of alcoholism or other personal difficulties." The action-seekers "pursue episodes within a context of rules, and do not cut themselves off from family and peers," "whereas the maladapted may be mentally ill, and lack the self-control and contact with reality to function in these groups."[9] The confusion of these two groups leads to an exaggeration of pathology among low income groups and to considerable misunderstanding regarding the meaning of their behavior, along with concomitant errors in working with them.

The Determinants:

What Produces Low Income Culture?

There appear to be at least four general determinants of low income culture:

1. Deprivation from middle class opportunities.
2. Indigenous sources--family life, work life, neighborhood.
3. Ethnic factors.
4. Rural origins.

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8. Gans, op. cit. p. 28
9. ibid p. 31

The Deprivation Thesis

The most predominant view today concerning low income culture and its determinants is that it represents a reaction to the inaccessibility of middle class goals. Low income people have not had access to professional careers, success goals, and the like, and their culture is seen to be the product of the various reactions to this deprivation.

One reaction to this deprivation is to be frustrated, and angry, Another is to be depressed and apathetic. The concept, of contra-culture is based on the first reaction. This notion is that low income culture is essentially characterized by angry opposition to middle class culture; thus, the formulation contra-culture.

Walter Miller obviously has a very different view. He does not see low income culture as a contra-culture, but as a culture in its own right with many positive adjustive mechanisms for dealing with the life problems of the people involved. The deprivation thesis delineates only part of the picture. Deprivation is one determinent of low income culture, but its signficance has been greatly overemphasized and largely reflects the use of a middle class yardstick in the appraisal of another culture.

The deprivation stress obscured the fact that the culture of low income people is also determined by the characteristics of their own work life, their family life, and their neighborhood life, much of which constrains, albeit unevenly, toward some cooperativeness, some mutual aid, some common feeling for each other, some cohesiveness.

The notion of lack of access to the middle class goals as a significant determinant poses questions that need careful examination. We often assume that if a low income person wants education--and the great majority do, according to all the surveys--that he wants it in a middle class way and that it is a middle class goal.

What he wants however, and this is central, is simply better consumer life. Education is seen as a means to vocational improvement and vocational improvement is a means for having better homes, more liesure, better clothing. The concern is with consumption for use not education for its own sake, for self expression, or for status.

Whenever the goals of low income people appear to be similar to those of the middle class, they bear examination for different meanings, different contexts, different emphasis. This is true because the central focus of middle class life is different from that of the low income individual.

The major middle-class orientation, determined by the job experience in middle class life and the preparation for it in the educational system, is one of competitiveness, individualism, and prestige. This is not the central value orientation of low income culture.

But the low income person is also concerned with status, prestige? The question is, what is the difference?

The desire for status and prestige in the low income person is very often connected with the simple desire for respect from society (some low income youngsters think, in a misdirected way, that by committing violence they will get this res-

Another dimension of the low income person's desire for prestige is that it is less imperative for him then it is for the middle class person. His prestige goals, compared to goals such as security, are much less salient. This fact has been amply demonstrated in response to poll questions which ask: Would you rather have a secure job, or a job in which you might go further, but which there is risk? The class division which characterized the responses is striking. The low income person more often says he prefers the secure job; the middle class person much more often says, "I will take the risk." The emphasis on collective advancement, collective improvement as illustrated by unions, is more significant in the low income group. In the middle class group there is much more individualism (although currently there is a new trend: witness teachers' unions and white collar unions).

Even when the working class individual teacher the highest point on the economic ladder within his class, his values are generally more similar to those of the low income culture, than they are like those of the middle class person. This is illustrated in the study by Bennett Berger entitled "Working Class Suburb." Berger studied a group of suburbs in California in which there was an upper working class group who earned a good deal more money than the average, and had moved out of the central urban area into the suburbs. He discovered that despite this much increased standard of living, their values and beliefs, in a whole series of areas, resembled traditional low income values much more than they resembled middle class values. Except that they had more consumer goods than the other working and lower class people, they were not much different.

Ethnic and Rural Varieties

There are two other important determinants of low income culture which should be mentioned: the ethnic traditions, and the rural traditions. The low income population in the U.S. today is primarily composed of minority groups--Negro, Puerto Rican, Spanish speaking people. These groups have some oftheir own specific cultures which affect low income culture. For example, the female based family is primarily a Negro dimension of low income culture.

The rural traditions are also important and color and affect low income peoples' reactions to urban life. This, by the way, is also true of the traditional working class in the United States. It also came from a rural background. (It is often forgotten that these people came from the farms of America and Europe. These rural factors still linger on and are quite significant in understanding working class culture, particularly the traditionalism and the attitude towards religion and authority.

A Balanced View

Our emphasis has been on the strengths or positives in low income culture (the cooperatives, the anger, the informality, the humor, etc.) Strengths that have emerged from coping with, rather than surrendering to, difficult environmental conditions. In developing this approach, however, it is extremely important to guard against any romantic view of low income people. It should not be overlooked that this group was more pro-McCarthy, is more prejudiced, less hopeful about peace, illiberal on a variety of civil liberties issues, and decidedly anti-intellectual.